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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001827

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/03/2016

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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: SOME HARD BUMPS ALONG THE ROAD TO  
POLITICAL REFORM

REF: A) COLOMBO 1816 B) COLOMBO 1731

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During his initial trip to the Maldives to present his credentials (ref a), Ambassador discussed the political reform process with several ministers and with the principal opposition figures. Assessments of the state of reform diverged widely: the government side portrayed the reform road map as a work in progress and on track, while the opposition vented its frustration and questioned the government's good faith. Events may come to a head on November 10, when an annual opposition rally is to take place. However, the ministers responsible for law and order downplayed the potential for violence. Ambassador cautioned both sides regarding the need to act responsibly to avoid violent confrontations. End summary.

ROAD MAP FOR REFORM  
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12. (C) Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed said the President's road map for reform included three major components: making governance structures more participatory, ensuring modern, legal human rights protection, and encouraging a vibrant civil society sector. Shaheed said that Maldives currently has nearly 500 NGOs, of which around 4-5 had political aims. He noted that Maldives has a cacophonous media landscape, with some papers trying to outdo each other to be outrageous. "Dissent is new to the Maldives, and some don't understand the limits yet."

13. (C) Shaheed told Ambassador that he had prevailed on the Maldives government to adhere to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights despite some cabinet members' reservations that national legislation was not yet in compliance. He had turned this argument around, he said, by noting that was perhaps the best way to speed up changes in national legislation to bring it into conformity with international standards. In particular, he hoped to make progress on making provision for legal aid, changing police methods, and introducing habeas corpus.

14. (C) Attorney General Hassan Saeed said that his ministry had met all its self-imposed deadlines for legislative initiatives but one ) the evidence act, which was technical in nature. He noted that he would need time to "market" it to some of the older politicians. He had encountered a "difference of opinion" on the proposed Public Integrity Commission. The Home Minister wanted the Commission to be an ombudsman for citizen complaints that would report to him. Saeed would push for a robust mandate with "intrusive functions."

15. (C) Saeed reported that the President had appointed five "fully independent" members to the Human Rights Commission on October 29. The Commission would have full investigatory powers to appear anywhere, anytime, without prior notice to investigate possible abuses. The Ambassador noted that we were in the process of trying to set up a similar Commission in Sri Lanka. It was important to get the framework right, but beyond that, it was a question of leadership and political will to have an effective Commission.

NOVEMBER 10 OPPOSITION RALLY ) THE NEXT FLASHPOINT?  
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16. (C) Attorney General Saeed was concerned about plans for an opposition Republic Day rally on November 10. He was not expecting a big turnout; nevertheless, if the rally turned violent, it would only play into the hands of government anti-reform hardliners. He criticized recent comments of opposition Maldivian Democratic Party Vice President Ibrahim Hussain Zaki as tantamount to incitement to overthrow the

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government.

17. (C) Home Minister Ahmed Thasmeen Ali did not think the November 10 rally would attract more than 300-400 people ) but that some of them might be "committed to creating a mob atmosphere on the street." Some, he said, were openly calling for the government's overthrow through street protests. Some government supporters were becoming impatient, he said, believing that they had already gone far enough to accommodate opposition views. However, his strategy was not to have to resort to mass arrests in the event of a disruption ) this would not be good for the reform process or the image of the police. The Ambassador underscored our support for the right of peaceful assembly and said it was the responsibility of both sides to exercise restraint.

18. (C) Police Commissioner Adam Zahir concurred that the threat of violence for the November 10 rally was relatively low. A few "strong-minded guys" might try to foment trouble. Ambassador Blake said that the MDP leadership had told him they would try to control their people. He reminded Zahir the police had a special responsibility to resist the temptation to respond with excessive force to provocations. Zahir replied that training provided by the Australians, U.S. and others had helped the new police force learn to respond proportionately and not let situations escalate out of control.

A CROSSOVER MINISTER TRIES TO BRIDGE THE GAP  
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19. (C) Finance Minister Qasim Ibrahim, a founding member of the Maldives Democratic Party, was jailed by the government in 2004, but subsequently "crossed over" to join the ruling party. He expressed gratitude for the role the U.S. government, particularly former Ambassador Lunstead, played in obtaining his release. He said the President Gayoom had recruited him to join the government after the December 2004 tsunami. He noted that although the government has since

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released most opposition figures from arrest, some hardline MPs had instituted treason charges against them in Parliament. He said he did not know what was likely to happen with these cases.

¶10. (C) Ibrahim told us that some in the President's party do not want to change and haven't accepted the President's agenda embodied in the reform road map. President Gayoom, on the other hand, wants to leave a legacy of democratic reform, but not at the cost of the country's stability and economic growth. Change had to be peaceful and in within controlled limits, Ibrahim said, but he also called for more transparency in the government's approach to reform. The perceived favoritism shown to the President's family and cronies was a source of popular discontent.

#### OPPOSITION IN A QUANDARY

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¶11. (C) MPs from the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) we met were upset and demoralized following the detention for questioning of some of their key party members. Party chairman and opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed told us that police had taken in party vice chair and shadow Foreign Minister Ibrahim Hussain Zaki that morning and arrested about eight other party members. Zaki was released as we left the meeting.

¶12. (C) Nasheed renewed his earlier complaint (ref b) that the government had reneged on an agreement to publish a joint statement after his own release, and was dragging its feet on enacting its own reform program. He said the government had agreed to set up an informal contact group between the two parties to work out transitional arrangements leading up to a

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new constitution. This working group had never met, however, because the government representatives simply failed to show up for meetings.

¶13. (C) Nasheed insisted that the road map had accomplished nothing. The MDP parliamentary group could and would control its members on November 10, but feared that the government was seeking to provoke a confrontation that it would then use as a pretext to "smash" the MDP. The MDP was not opposed to the government's reform plans, he stressed ) but had lost all confidence in the government's good faith and intent to implement it.

¶14. (C) COMMENT: There is no doubt that within the government ranks are hardliners who prefer to stop the reform process in its tracks. However, President Gayoom appears committed to seeing his road map through, and has in the Foreign Minister and the Attorney General two impressive leaders who share his commitment. Embassy has in the past intervened when the government appears to have unjustly detained opposition figures. That said, we doubt that the situation is as dire as the opposition portrays it. We will continue to maintain gentle but steady pressure on the government to fulfill its reform commitments and refrain from disproportionate reactions to opposition demonstrations and media statements.  
BLAKE